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# Himalayan Studies Conference IV, University of Texas-Austin, 26-28 February 2016

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government officials responsible for relief efforts. Swarnim Wagle and Mahendra Shrestha (Chief of Policy, Planning and International Cooperation Division in the Health Ministry) took questions regarding the government's preparations prior to the earthquake and efforts to improve planning and response in future disasters. Shrestha discussed the Government's efforts in preventing disease outbreak and the struggle to improve mental health services. Wagle addressed questions about the National Planning Commission's continued role in improving governance, emphasizing in particular the need for transparency and open data.

The Summit was filmed and is available through a dedicated YouTube channel, which provides free access to the proceedings for use by Nepali activists, scholars, and interested parties around the globe at <<https://www.youtube.com/user/dickeycenterevents>>.

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*With contributions to this report by the students in his course, Anthropology of Tibet and the Himalaya*

## **Himalayan Studies Conference IV**

**University of Texas-Austin**

**26-28 February 2016**

The Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies (ANHS) held the Fourth Himalayan Studies Conference at the University of Texas at Austin, February 26-28, 2016. Esteemed and emerging scholars attended twenty-five panels and four roundtables that broadly addressed questions related to social change, cultural processes, historicity, and boundaries in the

Himalayas. In addition to panels, attendees were invited to attend cultural performances and view films that addressed these key questions. Of critical focus throughout the conference was the role of social scientists in effecting positive social change.

Chaitanya Mishra (Tribhuvan University) opened the conference with a keynote talk on what it means to study social change in Nepal. In his talk, Mishra emphasized the need to historicize and situate development, identity politics, and federalism in conversations on time and space. He raised the critically important question about what role the social sciences can play in mediating local knowledge and experiences vis-à-vis the global.

Several panels addressed identitarian political mobilizations and social change in Nepal. The double panel 'The Tarai in Nepal's National Imaginary I and II,' organized by Amanda Snellinger (University of Washington), focused on social change and spatiality in the Tarai. Amy Johnson (Yale University) spoke on the creation of a Pahari public in the United Far-West movement, and the territorialization of space through affective relations in Dhangadi, Nepal. Jacob Rinck (Yale University) spoke about the mobilization of non-party Madhesi political actors in Janakpur, Nepal, and advocated for the need to consider how caste and socio-economics become bound up with regionalization and spaces. Frazer Sugden (International Water Management Institute) argued that properly historicized analyses of modes of production make ethnic and political mobilizations in the Tarai intelligible. Snellinger examined how in the 2013 elections, socio-political conditions influenced voters' decisions to vote in first past the post (FPTP) based on local issues, but in

proportion representation (PR) based on aspirational politics of identity and ideologies.

Arjun Gunaratne (Macalaster College) shifted the focus of the second Tarai panel to changes in religious practices within Chitwan's Tharu communities. Gunaratne argued that 1950s development practices, including the migration of communities from the hills to the Tarai, resulted in an expanded role of the Brahmin priest in Tharu's life-cycle rituals. Andrea Grimaldi (Macalaster College) spoke about how outward migration of men and remittances shape women's social experiences in Chitwan. Each paper presented addressed the constitutive parts of change in the Tarai. These talks highlighted how the Tarai became demarcated through movement and affective action.

Caste and ethnicity are integral to social change and the reconfiguration of the Nepali state. Mahendra Lawoti (Western Michigan University) organized 'Marginalized Groups and the New Constitution in Nepal,' in which panelists examined how constitutional processes abetted domination and marginalization. Lawoti argued that marginalization might become institutionalized in the new constitution if protest movements are not successful, while Pramod K. Kantha (Wright State University) examined the conditions that led to Madhesi protests against the promulgation of the 2015 constitution. In the panel 'Exclusion: Caste Class, and Ethnicity,' organized by Kathleen M. Gallagher (St. Mary's University), papers focused primarily on the ways in which Dalits are engaged and marginalized through constitutional processes. These conversations are critical to understanding the current state of Nepali politics.

Representational politics are aligned with cultural practices and language rights in the Himalayas. 'Representations of Race and Ethnicity,' organized by Andrew Nelson (University of North Texas), addressed cultural productions of socio-political identities in the Himalayan region. The double panel 'Himalayan Language Rights, Politics, and Practices I and II,' organized by Kristine Hildebrandt (Southern Illinois University) and Mark Turin (University of British Columbia) (I) and Miranda Weinberg (University of Pennsylvania) (II), spoke to how language rights circumscribe identities in the Himalayas. Turin discussed how legislative frameworks in Bhutan, Nepal, and Sikkim aid the construction of linguistic identities in these regions. Language policies have become a site of domination and resistance in Bangladesh, where, as Zahid Akter (University of Oregon) argued, indigenous communities, with the support of NGOs, resist the installation of Bangla as the dominant language. Similarly, Jana Fortier (University of California, San Diego), examined whether protocols designed to protect indigenous languages enables Bato, Boto, and Moutow speakers to do so. Spatiality and movement impact the survival of languages. As Hildebrandt argued, migration threatens the survival of Tibeto-Burman languages in Manang, Nepal. Rights and policies that protect indigenous languages are means through which space and communities become demarcated.

Identity formation and boundaries were also explored in panels on religious practice. In 'Local and Translocal Identities: Sectarianism, Ethnicity, and Politics in Himalayan Religions,' organized by Megan Adamson Sijapati, presenters considered the role of religion as a mediator of local and translocal

identities. Alyson Prude (Georgia Southern University) explored how determining who is an authentic *delog*—Tibetan Buddhist returned from the dead—is an ethnicized and gendered process. Sijapati examined how a shrine in Kashmir mediated local and national identities. Jessica Vantine Birkenholtz (University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign) situated competing sectarian influences in the *Svasthanivrataskatha*, a popular Nepali textual tradition, in the context of the shifting religious, social, and political landscape of eighteenth and nineteenth century Nepal.

Several other panels considered how religious texts, visual images, and practices create and demarcate socio-political spaces. These included 'Buddhist Histories from Alternative Centers: Decentralizing Narratives of Buddhist Transmission and Exchange in Bhutan, Sikkim, and Beyond,' organized by Amy Holmes-Tagchungdarpa (Grinnell College); 'Secularism in the Himalaya: Its Content and Consequences,' organized by Dannah Dennis (University of Virginia) and Luke Wagner (Yale University); 'Stories of Religion and Change,' organized by David Citrin (University of Washington); and 'In or Out? Himalayan Buddhist Traditions Take Shape,' organized by Joseph Leach (University of Michigan). Additionally, 'Art, Design, Stories, and Meaning,' organized by Carol Davis (Franklin & Marshall College), addressed how the role of art, including street performance, music, and narrative story telling, inform change in the Himalayas.

Panels on Tibet and Tibetan communities addressed how boundaries circumscribe identities. 'Exile Tibetan Communities: Resistance, Sustenance, and Continuity I and II' was particularly

important for thinking about how exile informs and is constituted by identity. 'The Himalayas Beyond Borders,' organized by Susan Hagen (Ramapo College), discussed social networks, refugee status, and exile. Roundtables, too, examined issues related to borders, boundaries, and regionalism. 'Nepali Experiences in the U.S. Immigration System' explored what it means to traverse boundaries and create communities. Specifically, panelists focused on the differing experiences of Nepalis in New York City, Bhutanese refugees in Pennsylvania, and undocumented Nepali migrants in Texas. At the 'Political Asylum and the Provision of Expert Witness-Revisited' roundtable, participants continued an important conversation started at the previous Himalayan Studies Conference in 2014 on what it means to provide expert witness in political asylum cases.

Public social science also emerged as a salient theme at the conference. As Nepal prepares to mark one year since the 7.8 magnitude earthquake that struck Gorkha District in April 2015, it is important to think not only about how social scientists can make sense of this event, but support efforts to recover and rebuild. On the first day of the conference, nearly 30 conference attendees attended two earthquake roundtables, 'Nepal Earthquake Conversations: Geopolitics, Humanitarianism, Ethics, and Representation I and II.' Roundtable participants engaged with two major questions: how should parties involved in crisis response conceptualize and respond to problems that emerge from social structures, and what role can social scientists play in crisis response? The earthquake was an event that required social scientists and crisis responders to think about what relationships and networks

can be mobilized in times of crisis. Many participants critiqued aid agencies' response, and in particular, how agencies conceptualize resilience. Importantly, roundtable participants sought to complicate ideas of resilience, and argued that resilience should be understood as an experience that is embedded within social structures and bounded by class and caste. Future conversations on resilience should also consider how resilience is discursively gendered.

In light of the earthquake, discussions on the role of civil society and its impact on social change in the Himalayas take on additional significance. Several panels addressed the role of civil society in the Himalayas. 'The Engaged Classroom: Theoretical and Practical Approaches to the Study of Nepal in the Wake of Disaster I and II,' a double panel organized by Kathleen M. Gallagher, directly addressed the role of civil society in fostering healing and change in post-earthquake Nepal. Many talks focused specifically on how infrastructure projects mediate politics. The panels 'State, NGO, and Civil Society,' organized by Steven Folmar (Wake Forest University) and 'Building Roads and Meaning' featured talks that largely addressed how development projects shape communities and their experiences' with the state and NGOs across the Himalayas. Similarly, papers presented at 'Politics of Kathmandu's Urban Spaces,' organized by Sujit Shrestha (Emory University), Sabin Ninglekhu (University of Toronto), and Andrew Nelson, focused on how housing colonies and settlements fit into broader conversations on neo-liberalism, politics, and rights. Notably, Sujata Thapa (University of Toronto), who presented at the 'Building Roads and Meaning' panel, focused specifically on how

infrastructure, both discursively and in practice, is gendered.

Discussions on women and gender were featured in two panels on women, the body, and boundaries. 'Gender and Health in the Himalayas,' organized by Mary Cameron (Florida Atlantic University) focused on women and the body in the context of development and social change and panelists presented on contextually grounded research on women's health. 'Texts, Traditions, and Transitions: Women's Journeys Across the Himalayas,' organized by Carole McGranahan (University of Colorado, Boulder), focused on the configuration of Tibetan women's social positions in the Himalayas and presenters situated women's stories in the context of changes in private lives and traditions across the Himalayas. Both panels highlighted the degree to which women's experiences are embodied and bounded by their bodies.

Theorizing bodies and embodiment is key to thinking about Himalayan communities' interaction with the environment. Several panels explored how the environment shapes experiences with health, politics, and urban spaces. 'Current Research on Health and Culture in Nepal and the Greater Himalayan Region,' organized by Mary Cameron and Judith Justice (University of California, San Francisco), addressed care and the body, and how health is a site mediated by local and global knowledge. Relatedly, the environment as a mediated space, and a mediator of community relationships, were themes that emerged from four panels organized by Teri Allendorf (University of Wisconsin-Madison) on the environment, each titled 'People and Environment in the Greater Himalaya.' Additionally, 'The Future of Climate, Land, and Food,'

chaired by Ken Bauer (Dartmouth College), and 'Food—Lack of Presence and Choice,' organized by Pushpa Hamal (Ontario Institute for Studies in Education), focused on the intersection between food, climate, and community.

The three-day conference concluded with a roundtable on structure and agency, which fostered an important conversation on the themes of social change and historicity, which were discussed throughout the conference. Chaitanya Mishra, Arjun Gunaratne, Sara Shneiderman (University of British Columbia), and Jim Fisher (Carleton College) asked the critical question: Is agency constant across structures and histories? Participants raised questions about what comprises a world system and what the structures are that this world system then creates. A key concern centered on how these analyses may reify agency and structures. It was argued that analyses of agency should not become detached from structures and history.

This conference fostered critical conversation—both in and outside of the many panels mentioned above—on social change in the Himalayas. Panelists offered insights into how religious texts and practice, art, and political movements can help explain the social world in the Himalayas. These conversations become more critical as Himalayan communities confront new issues related to governance, territoriality, and cultural processes.

For a full list of panels and speakers, as well as Chaitanya Mishra's keynote speech, please visit the 4th Himalayan Studies Conference website at: <https://hscaustin.wordpress.com/>.

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